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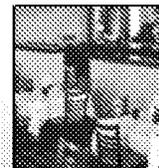
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## The Prius can take owners on a wild ride

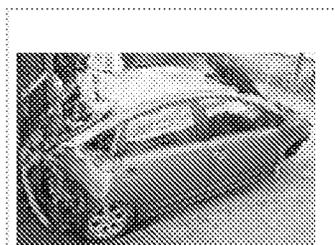
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By Paul Knight

Published on April 22, 2009 at 10:08am

Before the Prius, 10 compact cult cars to remember:  
[at westword.com/slideshow](http://westword.com/slideshow).



Elizabeth James was driving on I-70 when her Prius accelerated out of control near Eagle. She crashed through a forest and ended up in a river.

**Subject(s):**  
Toyota, Prius

Bobette Riner publishes an electricity index used to promote renewable energy, and she bought a brand-new Prius last year to shoot the bird at the oil companies.

"I felt so smug for a while," she says. She was lucky to score the car from a Houston dealership, because there had been a three-month wait for nearly a year to get a Prius. The dealership couldn't even keep a model for the showroom.

The car had a "cute little body" that Riner loved, and she reveled in driving like a "nerdy Prius owner," watching the energy-usage display on the car's center console, trying to

drain every possible mile from a gallon of gasoline. When she hit 2,000 miles, she could count her trips to a gas station on one hand.

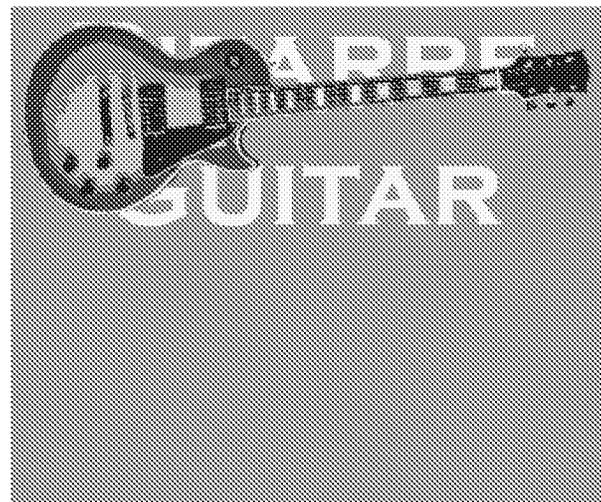
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On a rainy night last fall, a couple of months after [REDACTED] bought her Prius, she was driving to a sales meeting. She hated driving in the rain, because a car wreck in college had catapulted her through the windshield, and doctors had almost had to amputate her leg. Traffic was congested but moving, and [REDACTED] kept the Prius pegged at 60 mph, constantly looking at the console to manage her fuel consumption. Suddenly she felt the car hydroplaning out of control, and when she glanced at the speedometer, she realized that the car had shot up to 84 mph. [REDACTED] wasn't hydroplaning; her Prius had accelerated on its own.

She pushed on the brakes, but they were dead. Then, just as suddenly as the car had taken off, it shut down. The console lit up with warning lights, leaving [REDACTED] fighting a stiff steering wheel as she coasted across four lanes of traffic and down an exit ramp. The car stopped near a PetSmart parking lot, and [REDACTED] sat in disbelief, listening to fat raindrops pelt the Prius, wondering if her new car had gone crazy.

The Prius is one of the great success stories of the last decade, becoming the one car synonymous with "hybrid" and helping Toyota drill into a skeptical American auto market while the Big Three failed and failed again to produce efficient vehicles.

The car is the status symbol of the geeky, green, environmentally conscious do-gooder. Prius owners don't have to tell you they want to help lead the country to energy independence and lower our carbon footprints, because the Prius already says, "I'm doing my part." Soon after he was first elected mayor of Denver in 2003, John Hickenlooper replaced the stodgy old Lincoln Town Car the city used with a Prius. But in 2004, he replaced that with a Ford Escape, a larger hybrid, because "he needed more room for staff," explains spokeswoman Sue Cobb.

And that could be a good thing, because now another side of the Prius has zoomed into view, as owners share horror stories on blogs and message boards of crashing their cars through forests, garage doors and gas stations from Washington to Michigan to New York.

In September 2007, [REDACTED] of Tustin, California, was waiting in a line of cars to pick up her daughter from school when her Prius suddenly took off and crashed into the school's brick wall. [REDACTED] reported \$14,000 worth of damage to her car.

[REDACTED] of Anthem, Arizona, bought her new Prius in May 2007. A couple of months later, driving

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down a four-lane highway toward a stoplight, she stepped on the brakes but nothing happened. She freaked, then weaved into a turning lane, coasting to a Target parking lot with the brake pedal jammed to the floor. A Toyota technician told her she had run out of gas, but she pointed out that there was fuel in the car. Still, he returned her Prius to her with no repairs. A month later, she sped through a stop sign when the brakes went out again. "I think they thought, 'She's a woman driver, she obviously let the car run out of gas,'" [REDACTED] says. "Thank God I didn't get killed or cause an accident; it would have been on their head."

In October 2005, [REDACTED] of Battle Creek, Michigan, found his Prius speeding out of control on a highway before he "labored" the car to a stop on the gravel shoulder of the road. He was so scared of his Prius that he stopped driving it, but "under good conscience did not feel that I could sell it."

Jaded Prius owners say there's no resolution with Toyota — through their hometown dealer or corporate arbitration — and the company hasn't lost or settled a single lawsuit concerning "unintended acceleration."

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has two Prius investigations in its database from 2004 and 2005, but those involved the car's cooling system. Toyota responded to the acceleration problem in 2007 by recalling "faulty floor mats" that the company said could cause the gas pedal to stick. Another explanation from Toyota is simple driver error.

"You get these customers that say, 'I stood on the brake with all my might and the car just kept on accelerating.' They're not stepping on the brake," says corporate Toyota spokesman Bill Kwong. "People are so under stress right now, people have so much on their minds. With pagers and cell phones and IM, people are just so busy with kids and family and boyfriends and girlfriends. So you're driving along, and the next thing you know, you're two miles down the road and you don't remember driving, because you're thinking about something else."

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